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# WHITMAN IN WHITMAN'S LAND

BY HERMAN SCHEFFAUER

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Camerado! this is no book.  
Who touches this, touches a man.

LIKE that of his compatriot Poe, the fate of Walt Whitman, so far as his own country is concerned, forms one of the incongruities of literary reputations. It is one more instance of high and fiery ideals borne down by an ironic destiny, another of those peculiar reversals of hope inflicted upon an author by that just and all-wise Posterity to which he appeals so fondly and confidently.

How, then, does American posterity regard the great chanter of triumphant Democracy? Is he borne about like a light in its heart? Do his sonorous lines live on its myriad lips? Has his ringing message kindled that "love of comrades," that heroic sense of the grandeur of toil and of manhood which was his battle-cry and inspiration? Is there an audience for him among those masses for which he wrote, akin to that which Tennyson and Longfellow find both in England and America? And that true spiritual American poesy he hoped to call forth and foster, what evidence is there of its birth? No; the bard of brotherhood, the prophet of a simple, golden, and virile democracy, is quite unknown to the common man in his own land. Yet it was for him chiefly that he wrote and chanted his rude, impassioned staves.

The average American may have heard of Walt Whitman as he may have heard of Julius Cæsar, but to him the significance of the poet is almost as remote as that of the conqueror. It was the fate of Whitman's poetry to become, not a creed for the many, but a cult for the few, an excuse for the tenuous raptures of esthetic gentlemen and literary ladies. The simple-natured bard has furnished an ostensible reason for the formation of a Whitman Society, with an imposing list of vice-presi-

dents and an equally imposing annual dinner. And here and there, in boys' colleges and girls' seminaries, certain of his poems are secretly read in a mood fevered over with the red cast of sex. True, there are several uninspired disciples and emulators who wearily imitate the literary forms, vices, and mannerisms of their master. But beyond the small immediate circle kindled by their own enthusiasm, the outpourings of Mr. Horace Traubel, Whitman's excellent biographer and faithful if pedestrian disciple, and those of the late Ernest Crosby, fall on ears cold and deaf with indifference and vexed by the stale, monotonous reiteration. And yet Whitman has become a living force and theme for controversy among many of the young writers of Germany, has a goodly following in France—among which Léon Bazalgette, Francis Viélé-Griffin, Henri Guilbeaux, and Gabriel Sarraasin shine forth. In England that iconoclastic eremite, Edward Carpenter, has fashioned some of his most forceful messages in the fire of Whitman's genius, succumbing, however, like all the rest, to the perilous fascination of Whitman's measures.

Somehow this shaggy, thunderous phenomenon of literature, with all its pristine force, crudeness, and untrammelled emotion, its lofty, eager stressfulness in living, loving, and laboring, as well as its gigantic greed for fraternity and the greatness of the Republic, has missed its mark in America. Perhaps the posterity to which he will appeal is as yet unborn, but the fact is fresh and glaring that the real significance of this dynamic dreamer has been proclaimed by other lands than his own. This does not preclude his being read, for in some degree he has already suffered the fate of the classics, and is studied, not as a modern humanist with a message for the present, but as part of a crystallized, established literature.

For his neglect by the generation of to-day there is more than one strong and adequate reason. The most pertinent is the simple fact that the democracy which Whitman glorified no longer exists. The Americanism of to-day wears another face and has another voice than that which he saw so gloriously exaggerate. Its ideals have changed; the motive forces within and without it are such as even his prophetic vision could but dimly foresee. True, even in his own day the ideal and beautiful society of "love of comrades," of sane, sweet man-and-womanhood, of simple manners and idyllic labor, existed rather as a vision than a reality. But the seer and poet within him discerned in the chaos of the young and lusty nation the seed

and promise of national greatness. He sought to build up a new aspiration, to create new standards, new values for man; to plan a programme for the development of the commonwealth.

With his bardic heart glowing from the clamor and storm of the Civil War, in which he had acted as a kindly, brotherly nurse, he saw the embattled States, deluged with blood, emerge triumphant in the cause of the Union. The eagle of democracy, phoenix-like, rose over its own wreckage and seemed to justify itself to the world. In the bluff fraternity of soldiers and in the absence of all class distinction among these patriots in the ranks, he caught glimpses of a close-knit, altruistic love binding all American hearts and hands. The tramp and charge of armies transferred their echoes to his verse. His reckless sentences sweep on with wild huzzas; his long, uneven lines and staccato phrases are like columns, whole or broken, rushing forward to the crash of drums and trumpets. The exaltation of thought, the glow of passion, the unfaltering onset of chanting, dithyrambic measures, the loud, valiant note of stress and the tidal rhythms are the great qualities in Whitman which render all imitation futile.

The ardor, the new faith in the Republic brought to the breasts of men by the Victory of the Northern States; the noble, humble, humanitarian character of Lincoln; the acceptance of the African negro slave as a freedman and potential brother; the vision of a mighty Empire stretching ever farther West, gave him at once an impetus and a majestic motive. Invincible, opulent, august, he pictured "These States,"—superb and hopeful, the manhood and womanhood within them. His poetic Republicanism was imbued with the simple and noble spirit of a Brutus or Cincinnatus; a masculinity as unashamed, blithe, and free as Adam's; a maidenhood like Atalanta's; a motherhood stately and splendid; a race of regnant figures in a land of Spartan simplicity, Athenian culture, and Arcadian naturalness. The multitudes enchanted and obsessed him; in them he saw marvelous material for the supreme greatness of the land; the cities were to him divine citadels of life, liberty, power, and wealth. He adored the pavements, the shops, factories, and stone fronts of New York. From his peculiarly provincial point of view, Europe and its hoary kingdoms were effete failures, and the only hope for man and the race lay in the youthful vigor of the States. The steamboats of New York Bay or the Mississippi, the locomotives plowing the infinite prairies—these visible signs of power and growth filled him with

ecstatic dreams which burst forth in turbulent song. And in that song, impatient of restraint, of form, of tradition, he broke down all conventional bonds of thought and of rhyme, and shaped for himself the free, loose, lilting line that gave him scope for the play of his expansive emotions and towering enthusiasms.

Yet in that time, when America was still but an intellectual province of Europe, and modern thought was still waiting like an immigrant at the gates, when American civilization was saturated with that peculiar Philistinism which in England has since been dubbed "mid-Victorian," and when native poets procured but a scanty hearing, a voice such as Whitman's was bound to startle and outrage. He was regarded as one half mad, divinely or demoniacally, the critics assailed him and mocked his "barbaric yawp," the journals and magazines but rarely admitted him admittance to their columns. He was forced to become his own publisher and bookseller. But his gigantic optimism and his rooted faith in his fellow-citizens, the real nation and the ideal Republic, armed him against all assault from without or doubt within. He went on piling up his great ashlars of triumphant song, rapturously intoxicated with his themes, his rapt blue eyes distended with inner light, his beard and hair afloat in the winds, his open hands, inured to labor, held out to tramp and prostitute: "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you." He was the spirit incarnate of a new Golden Age, a prophet proclaiming a new dispensation of valiant and robust communism. Naked, and joyously proud of his nakedness, he proclaimed vociferously his Dionysian affinity to the Earth; rejoiced in the sunlight, the sea, the vasty spaces and brisk airs; rioted in his healthy appetites and vigorous sensuality; regarded every man as a comrade, and every woman as sister or mate. He became the indifferent father of at least six children by different and unknown mothers. Restraint he hated, musty erudition, the closely confined lives of house-dwellers, and the grubbing instincts of civilization. In himself and his untrammelled life he was dominated by a poetic anarchism and emotional disproportion; but faith in democracy and its institutions for the regeneration of man was the key and solid corner-stone of his work. He soared and roared on the afflatus of an epic spread-eagleism. To-day an all-embracing Socialism would be his goal and message. But Whitman's was a Socialism that was essentially human, social, and personal, full of bravery and the compelling joy of existence,

and bore scant likeness to the barren and arid formula which has become almost entirely economic and materialistic.

He proclaimed a nation of vital and independent men and women; he affirmed, everlastingly he affirmed. He saw that the opulence of the vast material Republic and the countless opportunities open to all, were sufficient for its jocund sons and daughters, to enrich them in life and gladden them in death.

I announce a man or woman coming—perhaps you are the one,  
I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully-armed,

I announce a life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold.  
I announce an end that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation,

I announce myriads of youths, beautiful, gigantic, sweet-blooded,  
I announce a race of splendid and savage old men.

Yet those whom Whitman would fain have drawn to him by his passionate love and explosive joy looked askance at this pagan, remained untouched by his voice and vigor, or turned away, shocked by his extravagance and unblushing phallic frankness. Their schools had accustomed them to expect other poets than this—and to find poetry in other forms. He was the futurist of his day, but no mere explosionist like the ramping madman of Milan.

The staid New England group of writers—Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, and the rest—regarded him with amazement, with slow and niggardly recognition of his genius and secret Puritanical displeasure. This was particularly conspicuous in the case of Emerson with respect to Whitman's "Children of Adam," though the Concord Seer in one or two instances thawed sufficiently to give Walt magnanimous praise.

The energies of America had not yet in Whitman's mid-period poured themselves into such deep and permanent channels of commerce, industrialism, and monopoly as is the case to-day. Corruption there was in plenty, both in trade and in politics, as Whitman himself was aware, but the enormous resources of the land had not yet produced a crushing and enslaving tyranny of capital, nor had the millions become entirely mammonized nor economically oppressed. The late war and martyrdom of Lincoln had given impulse to certain ideals, to Washingtonian patriotism, and had revived principles of lofty Republicanism. It was the multitudes quickened by this spirit and composed of splendid Saxon, Celtic, or Teutonic strains

which Whitman sought to lash and fire with his zeal and thunderous challenge of love and manly fellowship. In his cry there was something of the feeling men had for men in the Golden Age of Antiquity—a warm, embracing, devoted, though rugged love. On this score the “good, gray bard” has not escaped the deadly suggestions and deductions of pathologists and curious delvers in morbidity, who, with but little success, have attempted to fasten upon him a certain dark and damnable stigma. It is but a few years ago since the German pathologist, Edward Bertz, waged a bitter and wordy war over this question with Johannes Schlaf, who, with Dr. Karl Federn, is one of Whitman's most devoted German disciples.

Defying tyrants, flouting kings (George III. was still a popular, well-detested scapegoat embodying both), jeering at feudalism and tradition, Whitman strutted jauntily in the face of the cosmos, hobnobbing with Nature, sufficient unto himself, basking his ego in the sun, spouting forth the rude energies of his being, and forging his brazen songs like some priapic sylvan god or demiurge galled with his own inner fire. He was in fact, so far as power, expression, and mastery went, a sort of benevolent American superman exhorting his lesser countrymen to break with convention, to adjust themselves to Nature, and to fire their hearts and imaginations with the majestic concepts and democratic vistas he saw unrolled in unutterable majesties of height and breadth.

Walt Whitman apotheosized not only a new civilization and a people far removed from all that he held to be decrepit and antiquated in feudal Europe, but also the gestation of a new race. His poetry vaunted and proclaimed it in detail, its social organization, its physical characteristics, its natural environment, its unity and significance. But his insistent cry of “love of comrades” rang hollowly upon a land still suffering from a fratricidal war and burdened with the problem of its millions of liberated black brethren. His rudeness of diction, his absolute renouncement of all poetic convention, estranged that section of the public naturally susceptible to poetic appeal. To such his poetry seemed to be only uneven lengths of prose piled one upon the other; his fervor rang of fanaticism, and his themes were uninformed with either a sentimental or a Christian spirit. Dionysianism in America after the war was as out of place and time as a Bacchic revel in a hospital. Yet here and there in later years his very loudness and picturesqueness attracted certain cultured Boston audiences for his lectures. It was always

the cultured even then, and never the untutored, who listened to him.

The reason for this was in part that Whitman's poetry, in form and expression, was essentially a poetry for free spirits, for a nation, a race of masters each heroically individual, yet all bound together by a sort of spiritual covenant for the glory of life, of man and the Union. The jubilant Walt was himself the freest of the free, ranging nomadic over the country; unfettered in war, in politics, in love, in literary conventions, in dress, speech, and intercourse with his fellows. He lived and acted consistently with the poetry and philosophy which he shouted into the heavens, and each was but the unfettered efflorescence of himself. His poetry was not of an aspiration toward freedom, but of an actual realization and enjoyment of it. In this lies the secret of his futile appeal to his own generation and to this one. For neither at that time nor to-day—much less to-day—might the American boast the possession of such vast and epic freedom as Whitman expressed. In his time the common people, the bulk of democracy, were narrow intellectual, religious, or political partisans; to-day they have become economic bondmen to industrial oppression. For it is apparent that a new helotism has arisen in America, the necessary corollary of a new aristocracy based on a powerful financial feudalism. In such arid airs, in the narrow, jealous, and soulless hugger-mugger of opposing forces of capital and labor, Whitman's cry of comrades or love of comrades, if uttered at all, will be uttered only as a revolutionary shibboleth.

What, to the raw and alien millions with which the United States teem to-day, the unassimilated peasantry of Italy, Hungary, Greece, the Jewish refugees from the Russian pale, and the hybrid peoples from many little lands of southeastern Europe—what to these vast hordes, remote in language, race, and thought, is the idealism or poetry of Whitman? Though it should mean all things, what does his poetry, or any poetry, mean to their children? Their elders have fled from poverty or oppression, but in the new land they have encountered the new oppression of a ruthless, complex, materialistic civilization, rearing itself stupendously upon their bodily labor. The industrial aristocrat of America builds up much of his enormous wealth and power by means of this vast flood of cheap labor which pours into his land year after year. And by no stretch of his sympathies or imagination can he ever include in his own class these poor races he looks upon as inferior. Whitman's



idea of *noblesse oblige* as a national motto is not likely to appeal to those who grasp and hold the hard, imperial power of dollars in their hands. Hence the white serfdom of the States, while the liberated black slaves increase and multiply largely in idleness. Hence, too, sharp and bitter industrial strife and a storm of sordid clashings that rises up for ever. As the immigrant catches the itch for gain and marks the lack of respect for the law, a sullen discontent works within him. He becomes ripe for that frightful Armageddon of the rich and poor, the despoilers and the despoiled which his frenzied leaders prophesy.

The bulk of the population of the States in Whitman's day was of English, German, Dutch, and Irish descent—elements that merged easily into Americanism, producing a certain uniformity and solidarity in the type of the land. But now the diffused Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, and Celtic cast of the nation is being overwhelmed and surcharged with prolific Slavonic and Latin breeds, as well as what is certainly the largest Jewish population in the world. It is notorious, too, that the plutocratic and even the prosperous native Americans have little or no progeny, thus giving the alien majorities a still greater influence upon the final destiny and racial complexion of the United States. No new literature has evolved out of this struggling and motley concourse of races. Even the inherited and adopted language, English, is undergoing decomposition and change, under the influence of foreign idioms, slang, and native idiosyncrasies. In time the speech of Whitman, despite its Yankee raciness and its gallicisms, may be more closely related to the speech of Shakespeare than to the language of the future American. Possibly out of this there may evolve a plastic and vivid medium not wholly English save in stock.

It is on this very issue of a common speech and a vital literature that Whitman based his highest and most sanguine hopes. Again and again he proclaims the necessity for a national literature and for poets to act as spiritual guides to the people. "First to me," said he, "comes an almost indescribable august form, the People, with varied typical shapes and attitudes—then the divine mirror, Literature." In a forceful article upon American literature in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW*, he wrote:

For perhaps it is not alone the free schools and newspapers, nor railroads and factories, nor all the iron, cotton, wheat, pork, and petroleum, nor the gold and silver, nor the surplus of a hundred or several hundred millions, nor the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, nor the last national census that can put this Commonwealth

high or highest on the cosmical scale of history. Something else is indispensable. All that record is lofty, but there is a loftier.

He was full of warnings against the restoration of old codes and customs, against mental slavery and mimicry and the deadly esthetic sterility of the Puritan conscience:

What are now deepest wanted in the States as roots for their literature are Patriotism, Nationality, Ensemble, or the ideas of these, and the uncompromising genesis and saturation of these. Not the mere bawling and braggadocio of them, but the radical emotion-facts, the fervor and perennial fructifying spirit at the fountain-head. And at the risk of being misunderstood, I should dwell on and repeat that a great imaginative literature for America can never be merely good and moral in the conventional method. Puritanism and what radiates from it must always be mentioned by me with respect; then I should say, for this vast and varied Commonwealth, the Puritanical standards are constipated, narrow, and non-philosophic.

Then, in that peculiar prose of his, so rich yet so little known, a prose as idiosyncratic as Carlyle's, and as rugged, he utters the definition of his concepts, his challenge to the times, his opinion of what a true American literature ought to embody and reflect. Though the thought of the "Great American Novel" still haunts the scribes and critics of the United States, the native fiction of to-day has developed a certain vitality, and, treading in the steps of journalism, has become a product with many salient qualities of its own. Though great universality and passion and noble imagination be wanting, strong and faithful work is being produced by certain American novelists of to-day.

Whitman, standing in the dark press-vaults, amid mountains of white paper, and hearkening to the song of the crashing ten-cylinder presses, was wont to curse the feeble, ephemeral products of the writers of his day. Imitations, they, of the dandified importations from abroad, neglecting their colossal opportunities, and lavishing themselves in the elaboration of anemic amours. But his cry for huge oceanic poets, for a great nation, electric bards to sting men into action, goad them to the heights, translate for them modern thought and science, would, alas! be as barren now as it was then. Obstacles, different from those of his day, but quite as hostile to the acceptance of such men as himself, would confront this potential Milton among American poets, as they now confront those who seek a spiritual or literary rostrum in the forum of the vast Republic. Whitman would encounter those very things which, in his

darker moments, he foresaw—moments when even his soaring spirit grew clogged and leaden with doubt.

And still, providing for contingencies, I fain confront the fact, the need of powerful native philosophers and orators and bards, for these States, as rallying-points to come in times of danger, and to fend off ruin and defection. For history is long, long, long. Shift and turn the combinations of the statement as we may, the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness, and license beyond example brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? Who bridle leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainty and dreadful, threatening gloom. It is useless to deny it. Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all—brings worse and worse invaders—needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers.

Whitman, despite his innate and heroic hopefulness, saw a certain decay of old and noble standards beginning to taint the younger generation of the Republic; the symptoms of modern democracy which found swifter and wider play in America than elsewhere. These characteristics, growing day by day, will be recognized not only there, but also in England and in other lands. It was the disease of modernity on which he put his finger, the evils that had been visited upon the victims of an age of machines and money and a policy of push and plunge in material things, and of drift and sleep in the spiritual and esthetic. Here follow his withering and abysmal charges; let us ask ourselves whether these are not as valid to-day as then:

Shutting our eyes to the glow and grandeur of the general superficial effect, coming down to what is of the only real importance—Personality—and examining minutely, we question, we ask, are there, indeed, *men* here worthy the name? Are there athletes? Are there perfect women to match the generous material luxuriance? Is there a pervading atmosphere of beautiful manners? Are there crops of fine youths and majestic old persons? Are there arts worthy freedom and a rich people? Is there a great moral and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one? Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theater, barroom, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male and female,

painted, padded, dyed, chignon'd, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood decreasing or decreas'd, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners (considering the advantages enjoy'd), probably the meanest to be seen in the world.

It is significant that the keynote of his complaint is the lack of Personality. Excepting the late demagogic prominence of Roosevelt, now greatly blighted by the inevitable treachery of popular favor; excepting, too, the fictitious greatness and financial glory of Rockefeller and his like, one looks in vain for any dominating figure in statesmanship, art, or literature. American journalism, in contradistinction to the English, utterly lacks Personality. Personality is a force which the newspapers of the Republic hold in fear, because they are aware that the populace is intolerant of all attempts at individual expression. It is this jealous and universal assertion of individuality which accounts for the lack of it in conspicuous examples, just as it accounts for the instinctive resentment of democratic masses toward him who would assert his personality in intellectual leadership. It is the itch for independence which enslaves itself.

Walt Whitman was a prophet who, like so many of his breed, called aloud before his time had ripened, a poet whose fruition for America lies dimly in the future. It is well, no doubt, that even in small cults for the few his influence be fostered for the many, if ever his ideal democracy is to evolve out of the eruptive and corruptive idolatries, mixtures, and madnesses of this epoch. Undismayed, buoyant with fierce conviction and unshakable faith, he moved amid the thunders of ruin menacing the Republic and the later insidious threats of its decay, the bard of manhood, the chanter of democracy, the laureate of labor. The voice that lives in "Leaves of Grass" will never grow dumb; that tremendous inward fire will, in spite of all its soot and slag, burn on until, with changing conditions, the proper time arrives wherein the stalwart human bard may become a beacon at which men may kindle many torches.

HERMAN SCHEFFAUER.